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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRISTINA 000323

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR DRL, INL, EUR/SCE
NSC FOR HELGERSON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/04/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KV](#)

SUBJECT: KOSOVO: KEEPING DECENTRALIZATION AND THE NOVEMBER
15 LOCAL ELECTIONS SEPARATE PROCESSES

REF: PRISTINA 250

Classified By: CDA Tom Yazdgerdi for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Quint ambassadors here still lack consensus on whether Kosovo should conduct November 15 municipal elections in any of the new, as yet unformed Serb-majority municipalities mandated in the Ahtisaari Plan. The UK Embassy, once in favor of conducting elections only in the 33 existing municipalities, now advocates strongly for holding elections in 38, which would include five new municipalities and an expanded sixth (51), arguing that this is necessary to keep the GOK committed to decentralization and to attract Serbs to vote. We and the International Civilian Office (ICO) maintain that Serbs will likely not participate in large numbers in these elections and that forcing the issue when these municipalities are not fully functional will only endanger decentralization's credibility. Despite these differences, we all finally agreed to defer a decision until late August/early September on whether elections make sense in any of the new municipalities. In the meantime, we will push the GOK to move ahead with the formation of Municipal Preparation Teams (MPTs), the first step in the decentralization process. On July 31, Minister for Local Government Ferati, responding PM Thaci's instruction, announced that he is proceeding with an MPT in the large Serb enclave of Gracanica, after doing so a few weeks ago in the smaller municipality of Kllokot. Thaci, who told the Quint and International Civilian Representative (ICR) Feith that he feared elections in the new Serb-majority municipalities might well result in Kosovo Albanians winning office, did so only after being assured by us and the ICO that decentralization and local elections are separate processes. While agreeing that the GOK should be more active on decentralization, we strongly support this de-linkage and remain highly skeptical that any of the new municipalities will be ready by November 15. END SUMMARY

LOST CONSENSUS

¶2. (C) At a Quint meeting on July 17 including Embassy and representatives from the UK, French, German, and Italian embassies, and International Civilian Representative (ICR) Pieter Feith, agreed that Kosovo municipal elections on November 17 should cover only the existing 33 municipalities,

leaving the inaugural elections in the six new, and as yet unformed Serb-majority municipalities for a later date. We all saw that Kosovo Serbs, mainly due to pressure from Belgrade not to participate, would not vote in large numbers and that this would hinder rather than help decentralization. The (correct) conclusion drawn was that using the tool of by-elections at a later date for these municipalities would both allow more time for technical preparations and would prevent the distinct possibility of Albanian candidates winning all or most of the offices in them.

¶13. (C) A few days later, however, this consensus was lost as the UK informed a subsequent Quint meeting that London would insist on elections in 38 municipalities, including the existing 33 municipalities plus five new Serb-majority municipalities (Gracanica, Kllokot, Mitrovica North, Partes, and Ranilug), and an expanded Novo Brdo municipality with new boundaries that would give Serbs a majority. The UK rep argued that to do otherwise would call into question the GOK/ICO commitment to the concept of decentralization, and would actually keep Kosovo Serbs from voting. This appeared to convince ICR Feith as well, who argued at that meeting that technical preparations could be completed by November ¶15. Our position remained unchanged: we remained unconvinced that technical preparations would be completed on time and, equally important, that Kosovo Serbs would vote in large enough numbers to give these new municipalities legitimacy and credibility. The other Quint members were somewhere in between these two positions.

DEFERRING ACTION

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¶14. (C) Without consensus on this issue, the Quint and ICR Feith on July 24 postponed a decision on the number of municipalities in which elections would be held, while encouraging PM Thaci to press ahead with decentralization through the formation of more municipal preparation teams (MPTs) to develop the necessary administrative structures. (Note: The GOK/ICO announced plans to appoint the first MPT, in Kllokot, a few weeks ago. End Note.) Specifically, Feith and the Quint members agreed that at the end of August/beginning of September, there would be an assessment of the progress achieved along with a determination on whether the new municipalities were functional to justify elections in them (see reftel for a discussion of these issues).

THE GOVERNMENT'S PERSPECTIVE

¶15. (C) Both PM Thaci and Minister for Local Government Administration Sadri Ferati have been hesitant to proceed quickly with decentralization in the shadow of upcoming elections. In July conversations with poloff, Minister Ferati expressed great enthusiasm at the prospect of elections in only 33 municipalities, saying that this would ensure that the MLGA could take the time to develop administrative structures in the new municipalities and arguing that the existence of an MPT, on its own and with little time to operate, is not sufficient to guarantee a new municipality can stand on its own. Holding elections too early, according to Ferati, runs the risk of derailing the process.

¶16. (C) PM Thaci, in a July 24 meeting with the Quint and ICR Feith, expressed his own concern that rushing to introduce MPTs ahead of elections will increase expectations that November elections will take place in all 38 municipalities. He also said that he feared small Albanian populations in the new Serb-majority municipalities would win the elections, since Kosovo Serbs would refuse to take part. He reminded the meeting participants that his own PDK party had "won" the 2007 local elections in Serb-majority Strpce municipality, a

deficient outcome that UNMIK had had to rectify by re-appointing the previous administration and one Thaci said he wanted to avoid in the future. He made clear that there is no similar legal recourse, following independence, to correct election outcomes that threaten political stability.

¶7. (C) Following the July 24 meeting and at the urging of our embassy, Thaci agreed to proceed with introducing further MPTs, but remained concerned that not be linked in any way to the November 15 elections. With assurances from us and ICO, which stated publicly the week of July 27 that decentralization and the November 15 elections were separate processes, the PM directed Minister Ferati to move ahead with new MPTs. On July 31 Ferati, along with the ICO, announced that MPT formation would proceed in Gracanica, a symbolically significant Serb enclave, home to the most significant Serb political structures south of the Ibar river. Interviews for MPTs will take place during the week of August 3, and the MLGA and ICO may appoint the Gracanica MPT as early as August ¶7. Ferati also noted to us that the MLGA intends to pursue at least one more MPT in August, most probably in the expanded municipality of Novo Brdo. Plans for introducing MPTs in Ranilug and Partes are complicated, according to Ferati, since few residents from these regions responded to earlier calls for MPT applicants; Ferati is concerned that MPTs formed from the current pool of candidates might lack legitimacy, as the members would have little or no connection to the local community.

COMMENT: DECENTRALIZATION, YES, BUT NOT LINKED TO ELECTIONS

¶8. (C) The GOK's decision to resume formation of MPTs should reassure skeptics that the GOK is not abandoning its

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commitment to decentralization, a central tenet of the Ahtisaari Plan. At the same time, the GOK is right not to link decentralization to local elections on November 15. We fully support this approach, thinking it gives the GOK and the international community the flexibility to make certain these new municipalities are fully functional and will eventually be supported by a critical mass of Kosovo Serbs. To force the issue now would not only cause disillusionment among Kosovo Serbs, but would also raise the more general concern of a failed election process, the first Kosovo will administer as an independent state. We will weigh the results of the decentralization process at the end of August/beginning of September, but strongly believe that none of the new municipalities will be ready, and remain hopeful that our Quint colleagues and the ICO will see it that way as well.
YAZDGERDI